THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 58:
BIBLIOPHILES AND BOOKWORMS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 58: Bibliophiles and Bookworms. In this episode, we're going to take a closer look at the Wessex literary revival of the late tenth century. We'll examine some of the more important texts which were created or preserved during that period. And we'll also look at the important role played by a handful of bibliophiles and book collectors in preserving those manuscripts.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I am continuing to work on the ebook version of the podcast. Just to give you a quick update, I am planning on releasing the material in four parts. The first part will cover the pre-English period, so the period from the original Indo-Europeans through the Germanic tribes. That basically corresponds to Episodes 1 through 27. I hope to have that version ready sometime in April. That time frame will also roughly correspond to the conclusion of the Old English period of the podcast. So that will also allow me to gather all of the material on Old English and release it shortly thereafter. So that will cover Episodes 28 through 60 or 61. And then we can turn our attention to Middle English. So that's the plan and the general time frame.

So with that, let's turn to this episode. And let's pick up where we left off last time with the Golden Age of Old English literature in the mid to late 900s. Here at the end of the tenth century, we're really nearing the end of the Old English period. The Normans are on the horizon. And with them, the Old English period will give way to the Middle English period. But having spent so much of the last year and a half discussing Old English, I would be remiss if I just skipped over the period in which most of the surviving Old English literature was produced. So in this episode, we're going to explore some of that literature.

As we saw last time, the tenth century literary revival was a direct consequence of the monastic reforms spearheaded by clerics like Dunstan. All of those new monasteries meant there were lots of new monastic schools. And those new monastic schools produced lots of literate monks. And those literate monks produced and assembled lots of manuscripts. Some of them were new works. But very often, a particular scribe would select existing or older works which appealed to him, and he would copy them into a new collection. In the process, those older works were preserved. Sometimes, the scribe's copies were bound together with those of another scribe. Sometimes an old text was lying around, and it was bound together with newer texts. So many of the manuscripts that were produced during this period were a bit of a hodge-podge. They were basically collections or anthologies of many different works. Sometimes they had a consistent theme, but sometimes they didn't.

So in many ways, those tenth century scribes weren't just scribes, they were also book collectors and book worms. Their efforts saved a lot of literature which would have otherwise been lost. But that was only the beginning. Once those manuscripts were assembled, they had to survive the test of time.

I think we tend to assume that once those old books were written, they just lingered on bookshelves in some dusty old library just waiting for someone to come along and read them. But the real story is far more dramatic than that.

The fact is that most of those old books didn't survive the centuries. We've already seen that some were lost to fires. Some were just damaged or worn down and thrown away. In England, the Vikings and the Normans had their way with those old libraries and book collections. Some were considered pagan or sacrilegious, and they were destroyed for those reasons. In the 1500s, Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, and he dissolved the monasteries. In the process, many of those libraries were cleared out and lots of those books disappeared forever.

So war and religion and politics all played a role in the loss of many of those old manuscripts. But one of the biggest factors in that loss was language change. By the time Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, very few people in England could read or understand those Old English books. Many people probably didn't even realize that the books were actually written in English. And what good is an old book if nobody can read it? Well, you can use it for a door stop or a paperweight. Or you can do what the people of that period did with those old books. They used them for drink coasters and ironing mats. The vellum pages were removed to make drum-skins and roof insulation and to line beer barrels.

When those books were lost to history, all of the historical and literary knowledge contained in them was also lost. We may never know how much was lost along the way. But, fortunately, a small handful of collectors did appreciate the value of those books, even if they couldn't read them. And thanks to their efforts, a significant amount of Old English literature was preserved. So as we turn our attention to those old texts, let's also take note of those collectors and bookworms who saved them because this is their story as well.

As we turn to the surviving manuscripts from the tenth century, let's begin with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle because it was definitely being maintained by this period. As we know, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was an attempt to record the annual history of the Anglo-Saxon people in English. And that was really what made the Chronicle so unique. It wasn't written in Latin like most other chronicles in western Europe. It was written in the local vernacular of England.

It appears that Alfred the Great was instrumental in getting the Chronicle underway. The historical records which existed during his time were compiled into an early version of the chronicle. Unfortunately, that original verison was lost to history, but copies were sent out to various monasteries where local versions were maintained until the Normans arrived, and for a short period after that. What survives today are a handful of copies and fragments and copies of copies.

The oldest surviving copy is sometimes called the Parker Chronicle after Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1500s. He once owned the text. It's earliest history can be traced back to the 900s, where we are now in the overall story of English. Around that time, it was being maintained in Winchester. And as I've noted before, Winchester was essentially the capital of Wessex, and therefore the de facto capital of England during this early period.

But around this time in the late 900s, the second oldest copy of the chronicle started to be maintained. Historians date it to around the year 977. And it was maintained in Abingdon, the location of that second Benedictine monastery which I mentioned in the last episode. Over the next few decades, other copies were maintained at other locations. So each copy is a little different. Some copies include entries that are missing from the other copies.

Now, historians tend to put a lot of trust and faith in the accuracy of the chronicle since it was a contemporary record. It was the closest thing to a newspaper or magazine which actually reported events as they happened, or at least a few weeks or months after they happened. So the chronicle was a record of the 'news' of the day. So let's consider that word *news*.

New is an Old English word – *niwe*. And it meant what it means today – 'new.' The plural form of *new* is *news*, but that construction didn't happen until the Normans arrived. In Latin, a *novum* was a new thing. And the plural was *nova*, literally 'new things.'

Now there is a very famous urban legend about that word *nova*. According to the legend, General Motors made a huge blunder when they produced the Chevy Nova and tried to sell it in Latin America. Supposedly, Spanish speakers refused to buy the car because 'no va' meant 'no go' in Spanish. In actuality, the Chevy Nova sold quite well in Latin America, and the name was never really an issue. Despite the fact that the story was picked up in some textbooks as an example of a marketing failure, it actually appears to fall under the category of urban myth. In fact, a brand of gasoline is still sold in Mexico under the name *nova*. The confusion didn't really exist because Latin *nova* was understood as a distinct word, separate from *no* and *va*. It's the same reason that we don't think a *carpet* is an pet who rides in a car. We understand that there is a difference between a *carpet* and a *car pet*.

Well anyway, that Latin word *nova* passed into Old French. And when it passed into Old French, it was translated as *nouvelles*, which was spelled 'n-o-u-v-e-l-l-e-s.' So it had an 'S' on the end. And French used that 'S' as plural suffix in some words. And when the Normans came to England, they brought that same construction with an 'S' ending. They took the English word *new* and stuck the 'S' on the end to convert singular *new* into plural *news*, again meaning 'new things.' So this just reflects how certain English words were given a French spin to make them sound more than their French equivalents.   Again, *news* literally meant 'new things.' But over time, the use of the term evolved to mean any bit of new information.

So if *news* came along a bit later, what did the Anglo-Saxons call 'news'? Well, they typically used the word *tidung*, which survives as the word *tidings*. It comes from the same root as the word *tide*, which you might remember originally meant 'time' as in *Yuletide* meaning 'Yule time.' So both words had an original sense of something happening or occurring. The Vikings had their own version of the word *tiding* which was very similar to the Old English version, and in fact many linguists think the English and Norse versions blended together to produce the later word *tidings*.

So the annual tidings or news was recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Much of the chronicle concerns the comings and goings of political and church officials. So in any given year, someone became king, someone was appointed bishop, or someone passed away. As we might expect from a chronicle maintained largely by monks, it contains a lot of church business. So it notes when certain monasteries were established or re-established. And sometimes it mentions when they were destroyed.

But from time to time, we get some very specific information about political or secular events. For example, for the year 962, the chronicle mentions a great pestilence and it says that there was a great fire in London. It states that St. Paul's minster burned down and was re-built the same year. So it is remarkable to be able to put specific dates on those types of events which occurred over a thousand years ago.

Now despite the general reliability of the chronicle, the scribes were sometimes prone to the occasional exaggeration. They certainly had their own world view, and that world view occasionally seeps in. For the year 977, the Chronicle records an accident in Wiltshire in the southwest of England where there was a meeting of royal advisors in a manor house. The chronicle says the royal advisors were meeting on the upper floor, and the floor gave way. And the council members fell through the floor to the ground level. Now this account actually seems somewhat comical, but the chronicle reports that several people were badly injured and some were actually killed. But the chronicle also tells us that the old Archbishop Dunstan was there, presumably in his typical role as the king's advisor. And Dunstan alone was spared from the fall. He remained standing on a beam in completely safety. Now we don't know if that was in fact the case. The scribe may have simply been trying to emphasize how great and holy Dunstan was. He was the only one pure and righteous enough to have been spared. The details are a little suspicious.

The other notable thing about this particular entry is that it is the first recorded instance of a two-story dwelling in England. But it appears that they hadn't quite mastered that type of construction yet. A little more advanced engineering might have prevented that fall. But the fact that the Anglo-Saxons were building two-story structures does suggest a gradual transition to a more sophisticated type of construction.

In the years after the Normans arrived, the Chronicle was discontinued. And most of the surviving copies of the Chronicle ended up in the hands of book collectors, including one in particular. That collector is someone I mentioned before – Sir Robert Cotton.

Among the many manuscripts in Cotton's collection were several copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. I've noted before that there are seven surviving copies of the Chronicle. But there are also a couple of surviving fragments. And if you count the fragments, that brings the total to nine. And six of those were once owned by Robert Cotton.

I've mentioned Cotton before because he also owned the manuscript which contained the Beowulf poem. And last time, I mentioned that he owned the book which described the hand signals used by monks in the monasteries. And get used to me mentioning Cotton's name,

because he collected a lot of Old English and Middle English texts. And his collection will continue to pop up as we move into Middle English.

In fact, Cotton's collection was the largest collection of Old English manuscripts, and it was later turned over to the government and became a major component of British Library when it was founded. Since Cotton was one of the most important book collectors in English history, I want to tell you a little bit more about him.

As I noted earlier, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 1500s. And a lot of books were lost at that time. Cotton was born in the late 1500s in the wake of that destruction. He realized the value of those old books, so he set about trying to collect as many as he could to preserve them for history. He eventually became a Member of Parliament. And in the early 1600s, he bought a big house practically next door to the Houses of Parliament in London. And that's where he maintained his massive library. In fact, Cotton opened his library to anyone doing research and study.

Again, this was the early 1600s, and by 1625, Charles I was the King. And if you know a little bit about this period of history, you probably know that Charles was in constant conflict with Parliament. This was the period leading up to the English Civil War. During that period, Cotton's house became a regular meeting place for members of Parliament to discuss their grievances against the king. Remember it was right next door to Parliament. And that library became a thorn in Charles's side. The struggle between the Parliament and the king was raising a lot of unique and unprecedented issues. And the members of Parliament were trying to find a legal and historical basis for their rejection of the king's authority. And Cotton's library was the place to go if you wanted to pour through old books and records to justify whatever position you were taking against the king.

You might be thinking that this type of thing wasn't exactly new. I mean, Magna Carta was produced when nobles stood up to the King in the 1200s. And in fact, Cotton's library had a copy of that too. And original exemplified copy of Magna Carta was sitting in his library.

Now all of this started to concern Charles who wasn't happy with Members of Parliament using the library to research and justify whatever legal position they taking against him. So in 1629, Robert Cotton was arrested for distributing a pamphlet critical of the king, and the library was ordered to be closed. And even though Cotton was soon released from prison, the library remained closed for the rest of Cotton's life.

But here's the great irony of this story. After Charles was defeated by Parliament's forces in the Civil War, Charles was brought back to London for his trial and what would ultimately be his execution. But while the trial was being held, Parliament had to figure out where to keep the king. And guess where they put him. You guessed it. They put him in Cotton's house which still had its massive library. So despite Charles's efforts to that library down, he was actually confined there in his final days. And who knows, maybe Charles perused some of those Old English manuscripts while he awaited his fate.

When Robert Cotton died, the library was left to his son. And it was eventually given to the government. It was later moved to the appropriately named Ashburnham House, which was the house that caught fire. And even though most of the books were saved, quite a few were destroyed in that fire.

That actually included almost all of one of the copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. I noted earlier that the Parker Chronicle is the oldest surviving copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Well, there were actually two copies of the Parker Chronicle at one time. And Cotton had one of them in his library. But that copy was almost completely destroyed in the fire. Fortunately, a transcript of that book had been made a few years earlier, and that transcript survives. Also, the other copy of the Parker Chronicle survives. So the loss could have been much worse.

As we've seen before, that fire also damaged the manuscript which contained Beowulf. It was charred and burned. In fact, it had already deteriorated by the time it made it to Cotton's library. Many of the pages were missing from the front and back of the book. As it turned out, the book contained five different works, and Beowulf was actually in the middle. So even though the front and back of the book were damaged, the Beowulf poem was largely preserved.

Back when we looked at Old English poetry, I noted that most of the surviving poems from the Anglo-Saxon period are contained in just four surviving manuscripts. This book with Beowulf in it was one of those manuscripts. And all four of those manuscripts were copied and preserved in the late 900s during this great literary renaissance. So I want to spend the rest of this episode looking at the other three books.

Of those four great codices of Old English poetry, only one lingered on a bookshelf over the centuries. And that was the book which is known as the Vercelli Book. In the 1800s, a German scholar named Friedrich Blume was in Italy looking for legal manuscripts. In a cathedral library in Vercelli, he came across a book written in Old English. The book had been copied by a single scribe in the late 900s. It has twenty-three prose texts and six poems. Since it was found in Vercelli, Italy, it has become known as the Vercelli Book. It is believed that the book was taken to Italy in the eleventh century by a group of pilgrims who were on their way to Rome. Most of the book is religious in nature. It has the only complete version of 'The Dream of the Rood' poem. It also has several of Cynewulf's poems. He was the poet who sometimes incorporated his name into the poems with runic symbols. So that book survived the centuries because it was just sitting on a shelf in Italy.

The third book of poetry is known as the Junius Manuscript, and it is named after its former owner, Franciscus Junius. Junius was a Dutch scholar and an another avid book collector. He was also one of the leading scholars of Germanic languages in the early 1600s. He actually was one of the first people to study the Gothic language. He donated this particular book of Old English poetry to Oxford University where it is still maintained today. It contains four poems which all relate to Christian subjects. There is a re-telling or paraphrase of the Books of Genesis, Exodus and Daniel. And there is a three-part poem about the fall of Satan and the temptation of Christ called 'Christ and Satan.'

Now all three of the manuscripts which I just mentioned are very important to scholars of Old English. But the fourth is the one which really tends to fascinate scholars. It is the famous Exeter Book, and it is the largest of the four collections.

The known history of the Exeter Book really begins with a figure named Loefric. He was a cleric who rose to become the first bishop of Exeter in 1050. He was another avid book collector. But when he became the bishop at Exeter, he was surprised to find that his new cathedral contained only a handful of books. So he tried to build a library there. On his death in 1072, he left over 60 books from his personal collection to the library. The cathedral catalogue lists those books, and one was described in Old English as "'mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht.' In Modern English, it reads 'a large English book of poetic works about all sorts of things.' That was the earliest description of the Exeter Book.

Now let's break that description down a little bit. It uses the term 'leoðwisan geworht' which literally means 'poetic works.' *leoð* was an Old English word for a poem. It had an Indo-European root, and if we trace that common root through Latin, we get the word *laud* meaning to praise, as in *laudable* or *laudatory*. But within English, we got *leoð*, and again, it meant 'a poem.'

Wisan meant 'wise' or 'learned.' So *leoðwisan* meant 'learned poems.'

And *geworht* was the past participle of *work*. So it meant 'had been worked.' And if we put all of that together, the phrase 'leoðwisan geworht' literally meant the 'learned poems which had been worked' – but we can think of it as the 'poetic works.'

By the way, that word *work* has always had an association with literature. Today, we speak of an author's 'works' meaning his books or stories or poems. And that Old English term *geworht* produced the words *wright* ('w-r-i-g-h-t') and *wrought* ('w-r-o-u-g-h-t'). The word *wright* still exists in a word like *playwright*. So a playwright is literally a 'worker' of plays – not a 'writer' of plays.

The other word was *wrought*. We sometimes see that word *wrought* is a phrase like the Biblical phrase, "What hath God wrought?" And a lot of people think it is a past tense form of *wreak*. But it isn't. It is actually a past tense form of *work*. And we get a better sense of that original meaning in a term like 'wrought iron.' It literally means iron that has been worked or shaped into some form.

But there is an old theater saying, "Plays are wrought, not written." And when we consider that *playwright* means a play worker, not a play writer, it all starts to come together. But the major point here is that the composition of literature has always had this connection to the word *work* and its derivative forms *wright* and *wrought*. And that's also why we can refer to the 'works' of Shakespeare, or the 'works' of Chaucer, or in this case the 'works' of the Exeter Book.

The description of the Exeter Book also tells us what the poems are about. It says they are about 'gehwilcum þingum,' which is literally 'everything' or 'all kinds of things.' So if we put all of that together, this was a book of poetic works about all kinds of things. And that was probably the perfect description of the book.

Today, the book is a valued treasure. But, let's just say that wasn't always the case. This was one of those books that people in Middle Ages couldn't read anymore. So they used it as a drink mat and as a cutting board. It even has a long diagonal burn across it which has destroyed much of the text in the last part of the book. It appears that a fire brand fell onto the back of the book at some point and caused the damage. But thankfully, the book wasn't thrown away. And it remains one of the most important of all of the surviving Old English manuscripts.

By the time Bishop Leofric owned the book, it had already been in use for several generations. No one knows who compiled it, or who owned it before Leofric. Though the scribe or editor is anonymous, it is interesting to note what types of poems he chose to include in the collection. It contains over 30 individual poems and 95 riddles. The person who compiled the book may have intended it for his own personal collection. And if that was the case, we can assume that he had a fascination with traveling and journeys because the book contains four very important poems which all have a common theme of traveling. Those poems are Widsith, Deor, The Wanderer and The Seafarer. And if you pick up any collection of Old English literature, you're likely to find one or more of these poems in it. In fact, you might all four. They are all very highly regarded.

I actually looked at the Widsith poem back in the earlier episode about Old English poetry, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it here. It is basically a poem told from the perspective of a poet or minstrel who traveled throughout continental Europe. The title 'Widsith' literally means 'wide traveler or far traveler.' The poem begins with a long list of tribes and leaders mainly of the Germanic world, but some places beyond there, and the setting is generally around the time of the fall of the Western Roman Empire and for a short period after then. The poet then mentions the leaders he met and the various gifts which he received from them.

There isn't really a lot of drama in the poem. It is basically a catalogue of people and places. But what is so fascinating about the poem is that it includes lots of obscure figures, and almost all of the references are to people and tribes who existed in the centuries before the Anglo-Saxons migrated to Britain. It also contains several references to people and places and events mentioned in the Beowulf poem. So a lot of scholars think the poem originated in Germanic Europe in the pre-English period. It is probably a composite poem that grew as various poets added to the narrative over time. And the scribe who compiled the Exeter Book finally captured it for posterity in the version we have today.

The key thing about this poem is that it involves the theme of a traveling poet and his wanderings around Europe. And the book contains another poem about a traveling minstrel. This poem is about a poet named Deor, so today it is generally known as 'Deor.'

The poem consists of six stanzas. In the first five, the poet mentions several heroic figures from the Germanic past on the continent. In each instance, the poet describes some hardship experienced by that figure or the people. And each stanza concludes with the line, "þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg," which is literally translated as 'As that passed over, so may this.' So it was akin to the phrase, 'This too shall pass.'

The poet then states that his name is Deor. He once had a good position in the service of his lord, but now he has been replaced by a younger poet. The younger poet has received the land rights which he once had. But the poet states that he once had his day, and now it is the younger poet's turn. Then he concludes that final stanza with the common refrain, "As that passed over, so may this."

That poem, Deor, reminds us of the crucial role of the poet or scop in Germanic culture. He was an important member of the tribe. He was the story-teller, the entertainer and the historian of the tribe.

The theme of a wandering exile is also expressed in another poem in the book known as 'The Wanderer.' It is a poem about a man who once enjoyed a high place, but has fallen on hard times. His lord has died and he has become a wanderer in strange and foreign courts.

The poet describes the *anhaga* – literally the 'solitary one.' He says that the man enjoyed the favor and mercy of his lord. But sorrowful in heart, he finds himself in exile as he travels the waterways of the ice-cold sea. The man's lord had died and has been buried. The lonely man has been driven over the waves in search of a new lord or treasure-giver who might provide comfort and support. So he is now lordless, unprotected and forced to live alone. The wanderer recalls the feasting and joys of the past. But now, that is all gone. He sleeps in sorrow. When he awakes, he sees only waves and frost and sea-birds. His sorrow is renewed as he recalls his lost kinsmen. The wanderer adds that a man must weather his share of winters before he can become wise. He must be patient.

The poem then emphasizes how fleeting and temporary earthly things are. The poem says that possessions, friends, relatives and 'people in general' are all temporary. To express this idea, the poem used the Old English word *læne*, which is the original version of our modern word *lend*. So it had a sense of something temporary or borrowed. Now the Anglo-Saxons had *læn*, and the Vikings had their own version of that word which was *lan*. The English version survives as *lend*, and the Norse version survives as *loan*. So *lend* and *loan* is another English-Norse pair which still exists in Modern English.

So going back to 'The Wanderer,' the poem expresses the temporary nature of Earthy things with the following passage:

"Her bið feoh læne," literally 'Here be fee or property lent,' but it meant 'Here on Earth possessions are temporary.' The poem continues:

"her bið freond læne," literally 'Here be friends lent,' but it meant 'Friends are temporary.' Then, "her bið mon læne," – 'here man is temporary.'

"her bið mæg læne" – 'here kinsmen are temporary.'

"eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorþeð!" – 'all this earthly foundation turns to waste!'

So we get that same sense of transience that we saw in that other poem, Deor. All things are temporary and fleeting, even solitude and exile. All things will pass.

The poem concludes with the reflection that it is good that the wanderer has retained his faith in "Fæder in heofonum" – 'Father in heaven.' That faith is important because it's the only thing that is permanent is the next life after this one has come to an end.

So the poem concludes on a Christian note, but most of the poem has the structure and feel of a traditional Germanic poem.

The poem repeatedly refers to the role of fate and how one's fate in inevitable and can't be changed. Fate has caused the wanderer's circumstances, and it will determine his future. The poem uses the traditional Old English word for fate which was *wyrd*.

The poem states, "Wyrd bið ful aræd", literally 'Fate is inflexible.'

And it states, "Ne mæ werig mod wyrde wiðstondan" – 'Nor may the weary mind withstand fate.'

The fact that the poem uses this term *wyrd*, and the fact that is uses that term so prominently, is more evidence that this was originally an older Germanic poem. In Germanic mythology, gods were not the highest powers. The highest power was fate. Christianity supplanted this notion by declaring that the Christian God was the master of fate. And that meant the Christian God was superior to all the Germanic gods. And that was one of the reason why Christianity spread so quickly throughout the Germanic regions.

To express this idea of 'fate,' the Anglo-Saxons sometimes used the word *metod*. And that word survives in the word *mete* ('m-e-t-e'), as in to 'mete out punishment.' The original sense was to measure, consider or take appropriate measures. So 'mete out punishment' retains that sense. But *metod* was the 'fate which had been rendered by the world or by a higher power.' And if we trace that word back to its Indo-European roots and then into Latin, we get the word *meditate*. And we also get the Latin words *medic* and *medical*, which also relate to measuring or 'meting out' some type of treatment.

In addition to *metod*, the Anglo-Saxons used this other word *wyrd* spelled 'w-y-r-d.' And that was the word used so prominently in 'The Wanderer.' Now that word has survived into Modern English, but its meaning has changed considerably. Today, the word exists as *weird* ('w-e-i-r-d')

meaning strange or unusual. And we can probably thank Shakespeare for some of that change in meaning.

In Middle English, the word still had its original meaning of 'fate.' But in Macbeth, Shakespeare presented Three Witches who were prophets. Early in the play, they encounter Macbeth with predictions of his rise as king. The witches are referred to as the 'Weird Sisters.' So Shakespeare was using the term to mean the 'predictors of the fates.' And after Shakespeare, the word *weird* came to mean the ability to control fate. So it acquired a sense of something magical or supernatural. And from there it acquired the modern sense of something odd or unusual.

Now if we trace this word *weird* back to its Indo-European roots, we will find some interesting etymology. And this is where I tie together several loose ends. The original Indo-European root was **wer*, and it meant 'to twist or turn.' Since your fate is unpredictable, it can twist and turn in unexpected ways. But regardless of the particular turn, it is always pre-destined.

That sense of twisting and turning led to the English word *worm*, another creature known for its twisting and turning. And a worm which devours a book is a *bookworm*, a term which used literally for a worm which devours book bindings, and figuratively for a person who devours books. So *worm* and *weird* are cognate.

But let's take that one step further. If we trace that root through Latin, where the 'W' sound eventually became a 'V' sound, we get the Latin word *vertere*, which meant 'to turn,' as in a plowman turning the soil. By analogy, that word was applied to process or reading poetry where you turn from one line to the next. And that produced the word *verse*, which can refer to a part of a poem or can be used as a general term for poetry.

So that means the words *weird*, *worm* (as in *bookworm*), and *verse* (as in poetry), are all cognate. They all came from the same Indo-European root word.

So we went through The Wanderer, now let's tackle the poem which often accompanies it – The Seafarer. The themes which run though the two poems are very similar. They are both poems about a person in exile wandering in the cold and icy sea, but in The Seafarer, the cause of the exile is unknown. It is also much more obviously the work of a Christian poet. Whereas The Wanderer is very Germanic and concludes on a Christian note, The Seafarer has much more obvious Christian references throughout. But the overall theme is basically the same.

The poet describes the perils and hardships of the sea. It evokes the same sense of desolation and loneliness and separation from loved ones. The imagery is vivid. The poem is written in first person, and the poet describes a winter on the 'ice cold sea' – the "is-cealdne sæ." He describes his exile deprived of his kinsmen and surrounded by icicles, hail and ice-cold waves. The singing of seagulls has replaced the merriment of the mead hall.

He states that nothing on Earth can overcome the longing of the seafarer to travel the sea and discover what the Lord ordains for him. So here it is not 'wyrd' or 'fate,' but the 'Lord' who determines the seafarer's destiny.

The poet states that the joys of the Lord are warmer to him that this dead life, fleeting on land. And here the poet uses that same word *læne*, meaning 'lent' or temporary. And to achieve the alliteration which Old English poets desired, he uses the phrase "læne on londe" – literally 'lent on land,' but it meant 'fleeting or transitory on earth.' He says that earthly happiness is temporary, and everyone will die due to disease, old age or attack of the sword. The only eternal life is the life in heaven. The poet states that 'wyrd' is greater and 'meotud' is mightier than any man's thought or conception. So the poet uses both traditional terms for 'fate' – *wyrd* and *meotud* (which is a variation of *metod*), but by this point *meotud* was often used as a synonym for God, so the poet probably used the word with that later meaning here.

The poet concludes by stating the heavenly home is the only home worth seeking when one is lost and wandering and homesick. So again the Christian influences are very apparent in this telling of the Seafarer's journey. But overall, the mood and the subject matter harken back to the earlier Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons.

Now all of these poems have elicited a great deal of study. But the most fascinating part of the Exeter Book may be more than ninety riddles which were included by the scribe. They suggest that the Anglo-Saxons were fascinated by riddles and word-play. But the tradition of composing riddles was older than the Anglo-Saxons.

As early as the fourth century, the Romans were composing riddles in Latin. During the fourth century, the author Symphosius had compiled a collection of one hundred riddles. That collection was commonly known as Aenigmata. It literally meant 'riddles,' because the Latin word for riddle was *aenigma*. And that word entered English in the 1500s as *enigma*, and it still has a sense of something with a hidden or obscure meaning.

It was Christian missionaries who brought the practice of composing riddles to Britain. In an earlier episode, I briefly mentioned the seventh century Abbot of Malmesbury named Aldhelm. He was the abbot who stood on the street and sang religious songs in English to get people to attend mass. Well, he composed a lot of poems in Latin as well, and he specifically composed a collection of 100 riddles in Latin. So it appears to have been a tradition to assemble riddle collections into groups of 100.

And that takes us to the Exeter Book. It is the only surviving book which contains riddles in Old English. And since the book has been damaged over the centuries, some of the surviving riddles are just fragments. It is also unclear where one or two end and another begins. So some scholars count 94 surviving riddles and some count 95. Regardless of how you count them, it is possible that the book originally contained 100 riddles in keeping with that tradition of compiling them into collections of 100.

The Exeter Book riddles are somewhat unique in that they are longer than traditional Latin riddles which were usually just three lines. And the Latin riddles usually gave the answer to the riddle in the title, whereas the Exeter riddles force the reader to guess the answer. So there is still a lot of disagreement about the answers to many of the riddles.

It appears that the riddles are part of the Anglo-Saxon love of word play. Back when we looked at Old English poetry, we saw how poets used poetic compounds called 'kennings' to get the required alliteration in a poem. So instead of a *body*, you had a 'bone-house'. Instead of the *ocean*, you had the 'whale road' or the 'swan's way' or the 'seal's bath.' These compounds were sort of like mini riddles. It was a form of word play where the listener or reader had to figure out what the poet was referring to. We also looked at the Dream of the Rood poem where the cross is speaking in first person describing itself and what it had experienced. This was also the same technique used with many of the riddles. The object describes itself and asks the reader to guess what it is.

So let me give you an example of one of the riddles:

I was alive but said nothing;   even so I die.
Back I came before I was.   Everyone plunders me,
keeps me confined,   and shears my head,
bites my bare body,   breaks my sprouts.
No man I bite   unless he bites me;
many there are   who do bite me.

Can you guess what it is? Most scholars agree it is an onion.

By the way, that translation is from Paul F. Baum who was a scholar who translated all of the riddles in the first half of the twentieth century. All of his translations are accessible online if you interested in them. I'll put a link in the 'Texts' tab at the website – historyofenglishpodcast.com – if you want to look those up.

Here's another one for you:

I saw a thing in the homes of men
which feeds the cattle. It has many teeth;
its beak is useful, it points downward,
it plunders gently and returns home,
it hunts along the walls, reaches for roots,
it always finds those that are not fixed;
it leaves the fair ones in place by their roots,
standing quietly in their proper place,
brightly shining, growing and blooming.

Did you get it? It's a rake.

Here's another – this one may be a little tougher. Again, this is Paul F. Baum's translation.

I saw four things   in beautiful fashion
journeying together.   Dark were their tracks,
the path very black.   Swift was its moving,

faster than birds   it flew through the air,
dove under the wave.   Labored unresting
the fighting warrior   who showed them the way,
all of the four,   over plated gold.

To get the answer to this one, you have to think about the scribe who was transcribing it. The answer is a quill or a pen. It begins, 'I saw four things journeying together.' That's two fingers, a thumb and the quill. 'Dark were their tracks - the path was very black.' So those are the words or markings. 'They flew through the air like birds and dove under the wave.' So they scribbled on parchment and then dipped into the ink well for more ink.

Here's another riddle from the Exeter Book. And if you've paid attention throughout this episode, you shouldn't have any problem coming up with the answer.

A moth ate words. That seemed strange when I heard of this wonder,
that a worm swallowed some man's speech.
A thief in the dark swallowed a glorious speech and its strong foundation.
The thief was not at all wiser when he swallowed the words.

In case you haven't figured it out, the answer is a bookworm. And that illustrates the Anglo-Saxon fascination with books and those who devour books, whether they be bugs, or moths, or worms or people.

Along the same lines, here's another riddle. This one is longer and again, this particular translation was prepared by Paul F. Baum:

An enemy came   and took away my life
and my strength also   in the word; then wetted me,
dipped me in water;   then took me thence;
placed me in the sun,   where I lost all my hair.
The knife's edge cut me—   its impurities ground away;
fingers folded me.   And the bird's delight
with swift drops   made frequent traces
over the brown surface;   swallowed the tree-dye
with a measure of liquid;   traveling across me,
left a dark track.   A good man covered me
with protecting boards,   which stretched skin over me;
adorned me with gold.   Then the work of smiths
decorated me with strands   of woven wire.
Now may the ornaments   and the red dye
and the precious possessions   everywhere honor
the Guardian of peoples.   It were otherwise folly.
If the sons of men   wish to enjoy me,
they will be the safer   and surer of victory
and the stronger of heart   and the happier of mind

and the wiser of spirit.   They will have more friends,
dearer and closer,   truer and better,
nobler and more devoted,   who will increase
their honor and wealth,   with love and favors
and kindnesses surround them,   and clasp them close
with loving embraces.   Ask me my name.
I am a help to mortals.   My name is a glory
and salvation to heroes,   and myself am holy.

Can you answer that one? It's a book, and most agree that it is specifically a Bible. Some have suggested that it was intended to be a reference to the Lindisfarne Bible. What is fascinating about this riddle though is the way it describes the book-making process. The procurement of vellum is described, the cutting of the leaves, folding of the pages, writing in the book, and preparation of the decorated cover.

So these particular riddles show a fascination with books and reading. And that isn't the only connection between riddles and reading. In fact, the words *riddle* and *read* are cognate. They share the same Germanic root. That root was *redan, and it meant to counsel or advise someone, so it had a sense of interpreting and guiding and becoming better informed. One way to become better informed was to be advised by an advisor, but if you were literate, you could become better informed by consulting the written texts. And that is the sense that led to the word *read*. It meant to become better informed by reviewing written texts.

But some things are difficult to discern, even if you read them. They require a lot of interpretation. You have to read between the lines to discern their hidden meaning. And sometimes you might need additional counsel or advice to discern the answer. In English, those things are called *riddles*. And that's the common connection to the word *read*. They both involve some sense of discerning the meaning of something, either by reading or reading between the lines

As I noted earlier, Latin used the word which gave us *enigma*. And to a certain extent, the words *riddle* and *enigma* are synonyms in Modern English. One is native English and one is Latin. And Winston Churchill once made famous use of those synonyms when referencing Russia during World War II. He said, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." That quote has lived on and given birth to an abbreviated version. Today, you might hear someone say that something is "a riddle wrapped up in an enigma."

And that description certainly applies to many of the Exeter Book riddles. Even scholars have a difficult time discerning the meaning of some of those riddles.

The very last riddle in the book is actually one of the most difficult to discern. It is subject to many interpretations. Again, here is a more-or-less literal translation of the riddle prepared by Paul F. Baum:

I am a lordly thing   known to nobles,
and often I rest,   famous among peoples,
the mighty and the lowly;   I travel widely
and to me first a stranger   remains to my friends
the delight of plunderers,   if I am to have
success in the cities   or bright reward.
Now wise men   exceedingly love
my presence.   To many I shall
declare wisdom.   There they speak not,
none the world over.   Though now the sons of men
who live on the earth   eagerly seek
the tracks that I make.   I sometimes conceal
those paths of mine   from all mankind.

One interesting answer is that this riddle refers to the Moon. But two of the other possible solutions are more intriguing, especially given this themes of this episode. One other solution is that the riddle refers to a traveling minstrel, after all a minstrel would be known to nobles, would be famous among peoples, would travel widely, and wise men would love his presence. But the last few lines suggest another possible solution. What would leave tracks that are sought by men or people? And what would conceal its paths from all mankind? Some scholars suggests that the answer is in fact a 'riddle.' So that this is in fact a riddle about a riddle. And that is why it placed at the very end of the collection. So maybe this really is a riddle wrapped up in an enigma.

So with that, I'm going to conclude this episode about riddles, enigmas, book collectors and bookworms.

Next time, we may explore a few more of those Anglo-Saxon riddles before we move on to the end of this Golden Age of Old English literature. The king who had ruled during this period of peace and prosperity was King Edgar. His coronation was actually delayed to the end of his reign. I didn't have time to get to that coronation this time, so next time we'll explore why that late coronation was so significant. And then we'll see when happened after he died. And to give away part of the story, a lot of bad stuff started to happen for the young English nation. The Vikings were about to return. Edgar's son and successor was about to be murdered. And the crown was about to pass to the youngest son – a son who was so ill-prepared for the job that he acquired his own historical nickname – Aethelred the Unready. And Aethelred's abbreviated rule will provide the first substantial links between England and Normandy. So we will start to set the stage for the Norman Conquest with the events of the next episode.   So all of that and more in the next episode of the podcast.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.